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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 LAGOS 000523

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/10/2014

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SUBJECT: NIGER DELTA: FIGHTING IN THE STREETS OF WARRI

Classified By: Consul General Robyn Hinson-Jones for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

1. (C) SUMMARY: Fighting has broken out in the streets of Warri involving members of the Joint Task Force (JTF) "Operation Restore Hope" and civilians, likely militant Ijaw youths. We have conflicting unconfirmed reports regarding the cause of the clashes, but it seems the fighting began with a skirmish between the JTF and armed Ijaw youths in the early morning of March 9. It is confirmed that one JTF soldier and four Ijaw youths were killed. Reports of 20 additional civilian casualties have not been confirmed. END SUMMARY.

DIFFERING ACCOUNTS, DRUGS AT THE ROOT

2. (C) Joel Bisina, a moderate Ijaw and peace activist with the Niger Delta Professionals for Development, told POLOFF he received unconfirmed eyewitness reports from other sources that soldiers indiscriminately fired upon civilians in response to an argument between a soldier and a drug dealer. He said the shootings occurred in the waterfront neighborhood of Senegdene near the Nigerian Port Authority. Bisina said he was told the soldier was purchasing marijuana, but refused to pay, and pulled his gun on the drug dealer. A fistfight ensued and the angry soldier went to his barracks and returned with a truckload of his comrades. According to Bisina, the soldiers then began to indiscriminately fire upon the crowd, resulting in 20 civilian deaths. Bisina said residential buildings were burned in retaliation, which was confirmed to us by another source. Bisina reports the neighborhood was cordoned off by the military on March 9, preventing him from visiting the area.

3. (C) On March 10, JTF Commander Brigadier General Elias Zamani refuted Bisina's claim that innocent civilians were killed. Zamani told POLOFF that two soldiers, investigating the sound of gunfire at 0200 on March 9 inside the main market neighborhood of Awor along the waterfront, came across armed Ijaw youths. Awor is in the same general area as Senegdene. A gunfight ensued, leaving one soldier and four youths dead. At 0400 JTF soldiers surrounded a warehouse in an area known to be an Ijaw youth hideout, arrested 70 youths and confiscated two rifles and some ammunition. Zamani told POLOFF "all is calm in Warri." It is unknown at this time whether the March 10 fighting occurred before the telcon with Zamani.

4. (C) Reverend Sam Ken, an Ijaw youth leader, verified the shoot-out between Ijaw youths and the JTF to POLOFF and confirmed one soldier and four youths were killed. Ken claimed that the shootout on March 9 was caused by armed Ijaw youths who entered Awor to buy cocaine. The soldiers upon seeing the armed youths opened fire. JTF reinforcements later arrived on the scene and Ken confirmed that they burned several Ijaw houses in the Awor neighborhood. He said he heard reports that more deaths occurred as a result, but has been unable to verify this information. Ken said he communicated with Zamani and brokered an end to the fighting. He was unaware of any current fighting on Wednesday, March 10.

FIGHTING MAY BE ONGOING

5. (C) On Wednesday, March 10, ECONOFF spoke with Dennis Amachree, Halliburton's Country Manager for Corporate Security. According to Amachree, soldiers fired "wantonly" in Warri again throughout the morning of March 10, and that the situation was degrading to "complete mayhem." Amachree said one of his employees was moving about Warri on Wednesday morning attempting to assess the situation after Tuesday's clashes. Amachree said buildings and homes had been burned. By mid-morning, according to Amachree, the employee came upon renewed fighting near the old airport, located near the geographic center of the city, about halfway between the port complex and the current airport. Amachree said he had first

received information that an oil company's waterfront facility had been raided by Ijaw boatman in the early hours of March 9, triggering a military response to defend the facility. But he said as of Wednesday he had heard that a drug bust resulted in a soldier's death, and now the soldiers were simply retaliating. He said the ongoing fighting was not ethnic-based, but rather, was an unchecked reaction by angry soldiers.

16. (C) Amachree said Delta Governor Ibori traveled to Warri on Wednesday in an attempt to stop the shooting. Amachree said a meeting of security forces and government officials was taking place Wednesday late-morning.

17. (C) COMMENT: Given these reports, it seems likely that soldiers came upon armed Ijaw youths attempting to buy cocaine and opened fire. Reinforcements did later burn Ijaw homes. During the exchange, it is likely that civilian deaths took place, but have yet to be confirmed. Civilian killings by JTF soldiers have occurred intermittently within Warri since Operation Restore Hope began in August 2003. However, these killings were previously located at checkpoints and mainly targeted commercial motorcycle operators who refused to pay a 20 naira (\$0.15) extortion fee as reported in the 2003 Human Rights Report. (Note: These same instances occur daily throughout Nigeria by police and security forces. End note.) Stray bullets have killed civilians as well, including a 16-year old boy in mid-February. To date, civilians have not been the targets of mass, indiscriminate killings.

18. (C) COMMENT CONTINUED. JTF soldiers generally are poorly trained, poorly equipped, and receive minimal logistical support from military headquarters in Abuja. In addition, they receive pay only sporadically, and often prey upon civilians through bribes, extortion, and intimidation to supplement their incomes. JTF soldiers mainly man checkpoints within the city of Warri, and sometimes serve on Navy vessels escorting commercial supply convoys for oil companies. They rarely engage militant youths directly in the swamps. On occasions where they have engaged with militant youths, they are often out-gunned and are prone to flee instead of holding their ground.

19. (C) COMMENT CONTINUED. Recent killings of soldiers and sailors have not provoked retaliatory strikes as some Delta watchers anticipated. However, eight months of relative boredom and inadequate resources may have taken their toll, breaking down morale and increasing tension between the military and civilians. Innocent civilian casualties are always at risk. END COMMENT.
HINSON-JONES